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'5 Minutes With Matt': The Innovative use of Micro Video Blogging in Higher Education

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Introduction

Recent developments in online learning platforms and associated technologies have changed the dynamics of higher education by forcing practitioners to reconsider traditional assumptions of teaching and learning (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). This has fundamentally changed the nature and parameters of pedagogy within higher education whilst also shifting the associated expectations of students (HEA, 2000). Today, face-to-face teaching alone is considered somewhat antiquated; instead an effective higher education practitioner is now someone who can draw upon a myriad of blended learning strategies (see HEFCE, 2009). Because of this, the author of this paper contends that it is a fundamental responsibility of higher education practitioners today to be responsive to such changes and to continually seek ways of innovatively 'blending' traditional face-to-face methods of teaching and learning with new technologies and online platforms. In this vein, this short paper provides an example of how micro-video-blogging has been used as a blended learning tool within a social science programme.

The use of video-blogging *per se* in higher education is in its infancy and as a consequence there are limited scholarly conversations exploring their use. Crawford (2007, p.44) refers to them as "vlogs" and defines them as 'a weblog which uses video [rather than text] as the primary content'. In that regard Courts & Tucker (2012, p.124) describe a weblog as an online written platform 'that allows the blogger to post their thoughts, ideas, and commentaries on a website'. Despite little empirical insight evaluating the nature and effectiveness of video-blogging within higher education, Crawford (2012) highlights their growing use as a pedagogic tool to enhance student engagement and to reflect the diversity of learning styles and preferences amongst heterogeneous student populations. A basic web search will reveal the many thousands of academic video blogs that have been made publically available by higher education institutions and their staff. However, they are often very long, bland and poorly produced – failing in their brief to "enhance" traditional teaching

¹ At the time of writing this paper, the author was a Lecturer in Policing Studies at Liverpool John Moores University. Thanks goes out to the professional students and staff at this institution that informed this paper.

and learning methods. Frustrated by these limitations, the author of this paper set about identifying a solution to these shortcomings by piloting the use of "micro" video-blogging.

'5 Minutes With Matt': A Case Study

Presenting the context

Within the 2012/13 academic year the author introduced a micro-video-blogging initiative into a Level 6 module. Students enrolled on this module, of which there were fifty, were professional students studying part-time on a social science programme. The module had a 'practice related research' focus and involved a delivering a critical 'knowledge' element relating research design and methods before sending students off to execute a small research project in professional settings. Entitled '5 mins with Matt', the micro-video-blogging component of the module was integrated into the university's virtual learning environment (VLE) platform, with an 'episode' of no more than five minutes in duration being released on a biweekly basis. In total twelve micro-video-blog episodes were created throughout the module - complimenting six face-to-face lectures/workshops and several one-to-one tutorials with students.

What the blogs were used for

The use of micro-video-blogging in this instance was driven by an aim to provide condensed, efficient knowledge to students that would complement and enhance the lecture/workshop content and overarching learning aims of the module. Yet, as noted by Courts & Tucker (2012), one of the benefits of utilising technology to create dynamic learning environments is that it can be tailored to the preferences and needs of both the practitioner and the student. As such the use of video-blogs in this context was not prescribed or pre-determined from the outset but rather responded to demand as the module progressed. An evaluative reflection of these micro-blogs and their content at the end of the academic year identified that they were utilised for four main reasons:

1. *To provide a concentrated overview of key themes and concepts:* some episodes had been solely dedicated to an overview of a single theme, topic or academic concept. Examples included 'Choosing a research topic'; 'What is qualitative Research?'; 'Using online surveys'. These provided a bank of foundation knowledge resources that could be utilised by students according to their different research approaches.
2. *To add or clarify information:* here episodes had been created to accommodate for knowledge that was overlooked with the face-to-face lectures/workshops or in response to student's expressing confusion / lack of understanding of concepts after this formal delivery. In terms of the former, episodes were created to remedy this shortfall of intended knowledge. In terms the latter, this provided the author with an opportunity to

reflect on their delivery style and to respond with a blog episode that re-presented the ambiguous knowledge in a more clear and considered way.

3. *To provide informal knowledge:* Based on a conception of lectures/workshops as being a pedagogic space for the transmission of 'formal' academic knowledge (i.e. knowledge grounded in a credible academic evidence base), some episodes were created to communicate 'informal' knowledge based on the practical experiences and personal views of the module leader. For example, after delivering a lecturer on qualitative data analysis, the author produced an episode that talked about the practical considerations and hurdles of executing such analysis – drawing on examples from their own research experiences, where things had gone wrong, where they had learned lesson and what they would recommend to students as a result. This knowledge would not be suitable to cite within the academic work, but was useful advice for students as they approached translating the academic into practice.
4. *To communicate expectations:* at the beginning, middle and looming end of the module the author created episodes to clarify expectations – in regard to anticipated student progress, formal deadlines, formatting requirements, what documents needed to be included in the summative submission etc. This was also a useful way to respond to and communicate common student questions to all students on the module.

Practicalities: Step by Step

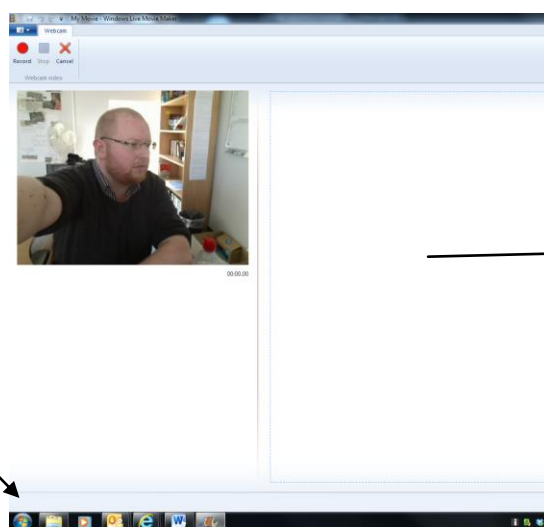
The practicalities of integrating technology into teaching and learning can be daunting. However, for the purpose of the micro-video-blogs being discussed, it was achieved using five relatively straight forward steps:

Step 1: Make sure that you have the technological capabilities before you start. You will need a computer or mobile device that has a camera and microphone set up on it as well a software package that allows you to record and save video files. The example below the author using 'Windows Live Movie Maker', which is software that is included on most windows supported computers. Alternatively, you can use the video recording function of an ipad/other mobile device with a recording function, which achieves the same result.

What I like about this software is that it is really easy to use. Just press 'Record' and that's it.

When you finish your video it will give you the option to save it to your 'M' drive.

Find the software in your computer using the windows start tab



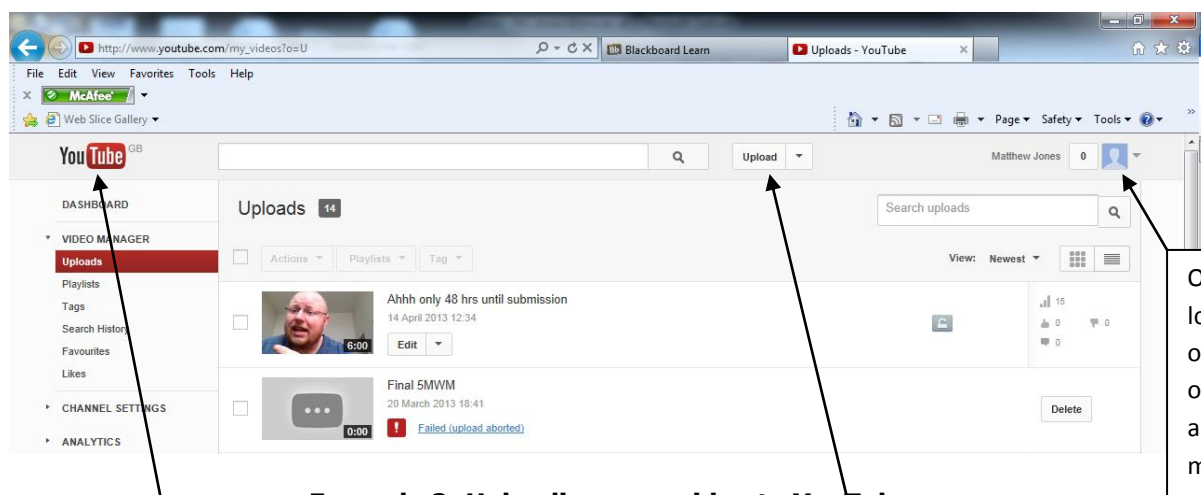
The advantage of the 'windows live movie maker' software is that it is really easy to use. Just press 'Record' and that's it.

When you finish your video it will give you the option to save it to your designated storage area (e.g. My Documents/Videos)

Example 1: Recording a video blog episode

Step 2: Decide on a topic and record your micro-video-blog, making sure to stick to the 5 minute duration time limit. Don't be afraid to use a stop watch and incorporate the countdown into your video. Save the final version onto an area with your computer / recording device. If you have a mobile recording device, think innovatively about the location of your video in order to make the viewing more interesting for students (e.g. at a conference, in a coffee shop, in your living room at home).

Step 3: Next, to overcome some of the different system requirements and technological competencies amongst students, upload your video onto YouTube (making sure to restrict the privacy settings so that only people with the link can see the video – unless you want the world to see it of course). You could just upload your recorded video onto the VLE as an MP4 file at this point if you prefer, however by uploading your video onto YouTube or a similar platform students only need access to a computer or mobile device that is able to load a webpage to view it, eliminating any viewing difficulties due to device variances/technical requirements. It is advisable that you show student how the micro-video-blogs will work when you first introduce the concept in a lecture/workshop.

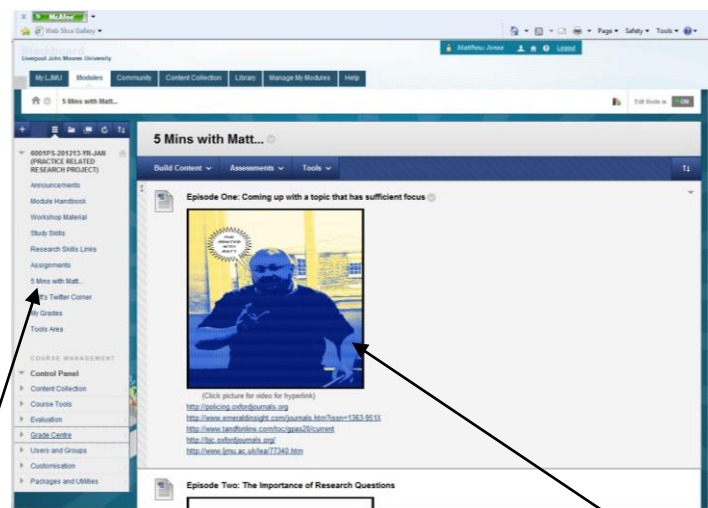


Example 2: Uploading your video to YouTube

If you haven't got a YouTube account then set one up (www.youtube.com). If you have a Google Mail account you can use this.

Then upload the video from your computer using the 'upload' tab. This will throw up some options e.g. including a title for your video. Under 'privacy' settings make sure that you select 'unlisted' so that only people who have the web link to your video can see it. Once the video is uploaded it will provide you with a link that you can embed into your VLE or paste and disseminate to students via email etc.

Step 4: Set up an area within your VLE for your micro-video-blogs to be located. Do what you can to encourage students to visit this area regularly e.g. in this example software was used to create a caricature image of the module leader which was used as a form of branding for the initiative. This then provided an image for the YouTube webpage address to be hyperlinked from after each episode was recorded.



Example 3: Hosting your videos with your VLE

Set up a tab within the module on your VLE.
E.g. the author called his '5 mins with Matt' and advertised it to students as a weekly feature to look out for.

The author then used an iPad application to create a caricature image of himself, which was used to hyperlink the video links off every week (different colours and different captions in the speech bubbles were used each week to add a bit of personality)

Step 5: Finally, let students know that there is a new micro-video-blog episode to view.

Student Responses

Student feedback on the use of micro-video blogging in this context has been overwhelmingly positive. As part of an end of module exercise where students were asked to fill out an evaluation proforma of the '5 mins with matt' initiative, they acknowledged four aspects of the micro-video-blogs that they found beneficial:

1. *It offers a flexible way of learning.* Being part-time professional students were able to access the micro-video-blogs at a time and place that complimented their individual employment and private life demands. The growth of mobile devices was seen to facilitate this view, with the majority of students disclosing that they mainly used a mobile device to view the video blog episodes. Some provided specific examples of watching the video-blogs on their mobile devices during their coffee break or on the train travelling to/from work.
2. *They get to the point:* students were particularly receptive to the time limit placed on the video-blogs. This encouraged students to watch them as they knew that it wouldn't take up too much of their private time. Despite this, the information within them was still seen to be of a high quality and relevance. As one student noted when asked about the effectiveness of the micro-video-blogs - "*They are brief but bountiful. An excellent learning aide, especially for those of us a bit older in years*".
3. *They provide a tangible resource with functionality to process the information according to different capabilities and learning needs.* This was reflected in the following feedback quote from a student:

"Watching the five minutes with Matt video-blogs is like a mini tutorial or lecture that can be rewound to extract the import bits of information or guidance that are required for the piece of work I am completing. If I am unsure of something or what is required I am able to re-watch the video again, which allows me to pick up information I missed the first time, or clarify points that I am unsure of".

4. *That they were set in different locations.* At the beginning of the trial, the author unconsciously filmed different episodes of the video blogs in different locations on a laptop computer. For example one episode was filmed in his office at work, another in his living room at his home, another in a quite coffee shop. This, interestingly, became point of intrigue for students, which they acknowledge encouraged them to watch episodes as soon as they were released. This is a particular area of the initiative that the author is planning to develop in the next academic year.

Conclusion

The use of micro-video-blogging has considerable potential for use in higher education. It provides practitioners with a flexible platform through which to enhance traditional face-to-face learning and teaching, in a way that compliments the technical competencies and learning needs of a wide spectrum of students. One of the particular benefits of "micro" video-blogging is the ability to efficiently disseminate concentrated areas of knowledge to students - which can be viewed on a variety of static or mobile devices - making them useful for part-time and professional students for whom higher education is not their only demand. Despite this, the ability to challenge traditional conceptions of space in higher education by hosting episodes of these micro-video-blogs in diverse locations, makes their use attractive and enticing to all students. Accordingly, the author of this paper is a firm advocate of their use and encourages higher education practitioners to consider how the principle of micro-video-blogging might be tailored and applied to the needs of their own subject areas and students.

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